

## Affective Problems in Writing

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### Recommended Citation

Nehiley, James and Sutherland, John (1992) "Affective Problems in Writing," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 76: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1462>

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### Abstract

This study sought to determine if tests were available that would allow professors and instructors of College Writing to identify students with differing personality types and attitudes about writing.

## Affective Problems In Writing

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This study sought to determine if tests were available that would allow professors and instructors of College Writing to identify students with differing personality types and attitudes about writing. These tests, if effective, would allow teachers to (1) customize writing assignments to the writing problems or abilities of the students, (2) minimize individual preconceptions and predispositions and (3) maximize their writing performance.

Two hundred fifty-four writing students attending the University of Florida's College of Agriculture were tested using the Kiersey-Bates Personality test, the Mass Communication Writing Anxiety Measure (MCWAM) and a test designed to locate students who block at various stages during composition.

The results showed that students who had different personality types and attitudes toward writing could be identified so that writing situations and assignments could be specifically devised to offset or capitalize on these tendencies.

### Introduction

Traditionally, college writing instruction has centered on such cognitive factors as spelling and the so-called rules for writing, which include grammar and punctuation. Usually, the emphasis has been on the time-proven method of marking errors in red with cryptic comments like "splice, 7a" to indicate that the student has joined two main clauses with a comma and can find the answer to that problem in section 7a in their writing text. But, what about

those students whose problems are affective? That is, what about those students who find writing difficult because of their attitudes about themselves, or the act of writing, or the rules of writing?

In recent years, research into the attitudes of college students has shown that many have problems writing because they 'block' at different stages when they try to compose. Some students block strongly at the start because they believe that the beginning is absolutely the most

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important part of writing (Upper, 1974). These people are stymied because they have been told that if their work doesn't include a comprehensive plan or outline and their beginning isn't exactly "perfect," their paper will be disorganized and incomplete (Rose, 1980). Other students block intermittently during the writing process because they have writing rules that force them to start and stop and evaluate as they progress ("avoid passive voice," "balance your verb tense," "avoid the nominative case of pronouns"). Still others block heavily at the end because they fear that a final product might be evaluated harshly and reflect poorly on them or their abilities. Obviously, some students avoid writing because unsuccessful past experiences have left them apprehensive about writing again (Rose, 1980), but many others block because they are by nature less organized and have a tough time seeing the overall picture and knowing where to begin and in what order things should progress (Flower & Hayes 1980). And, maddeningly, some writers, the ones who suffer the greatest apprehension, have a tough time composing because they are excellent writers and are concerned about doing a first-rate job.

Clearly all these people need to know when they have constructed sentences improperly. However, this helpful information won't free them to write more fluently, and therefore more effectively. Just as it is obvious that college students are different from each other, it is also obvious that students will have different writing problems. Is there some way that professors and instructors in college can identify these people and design writing assignments that will help them overcome their reasons for blocking? This study is designed to

show writing teachers easy-to-administer-and-analyze tests to comprehensively identify student-writers with (1) different personality types, (2) unique self perceptions and (3) distinct attitudes about perceiving and organizing material to be written. The tests used were a well-known personality test, a test to determine if students block when they try to write and a test to determine when and where students suffer greatest apprehension during the writing process.

The first test used was the Kiersey-Bates personality test (Kiersey & Bates, 1978), a test that identifies basic temperaments of students. The idea of temperaments in individuals is not a new concept, indeed the notion can be traced backwards through the work of Maslow to Adler to Freud to Jung and even back to Hippocrates and his version of the four basic temperaments Sanguine, Choleric, Phlegmatic and melancholic (Kiersey & Bates, 1978). The Kiersey-Bates test was chosen because writing instructors can use it without prohibitive charge and research conducted at the University of Florida showed that results correlated well with results from other, more commonly used personality tests.

The Kiersey-Bates test identifies, first of all, the students who are introverted (I-types) or extroverted (E-types) by nature. According to research, introverted people are inwardly motivated and territorial. They dislike communicating with others and actually feel intimidated or physically weakened when they must talk and write. Extroverted individuals, on the other hand, enjoy communicating with others and feel motivated and strengthened when they write.

Another part of the Kiersey-Bates test determines those who are sensing (S-types) or intuitive (N-types, [the I is for introverted]). Sensing individuals are fact-oriented and are unimpressed with intuitive decisions arrived at with imagination. They have no trouble reporting facts or data, but they have trouble creating the introduction or summary that provides perspective (Flowers & Hayes, 1980). The good news is sensing types almost never make errors of grammar or punctuation. The bad news is they dislike tackling new problems, so they must block heavily when they try to begin. Intuitive types, on the other hand, love to tackle new problems. They can skip from one activity to the next, perhaps completing none. Jung described the intuitive as one who plants the field and then is off before the crop comes in (Kiersey & Bates, 1978). Intuitive types often make errors in writing and frequently jump to conclusions. As a result, they are strong at the beginning, but lose interest before they can do an effective job of wrapping up the paper.

The Kiersey-Bates test also distinguishes between those students who have perceptual (P-types) or judging (J-types) personalities. Perceptive are individuals who prefer to leave tasks open for later alterations. They suffer extreme anxiety while they write because they want more time to collect information before they decide what belongs in a paper and what doesn't. Because they desire additional material, perceptive often find it difficult to edit information not necessary to the task at hand and frequently have to throw their work together at the last minute because it is late. Judging types, on the other hand, suffer anxiety if they don't make a decision immediately. They leap to conclusions in their

eagerness to get on with the job. The good news is J-types don't suffer pre-writing apprehension. The bad news is their papers are usually not well-thought-out because they chose the first subject they came across.

Another test that can be useful to locate students suffering from different writing problems is the Mass Communication Writing Anxiety Measure (MCWAM), a test for writing apprehension (Riffe & Stack, 1988). The MCWAM is a multidimensional test adapted from early research into public speaking or rhetorical apprehension (Riffe & Stack, 1988). It is multidimensional because writing apprehension encompasses a range of attitudes toward writing, not just a fear of writing. Research found that apprehension consisted of dispositional attitudes existing over time and context, and situational attitudes specific to a particular task (Riffe & Stack, 1988). Dispositional attitudes are propensities or predispositions. Situational attitudes, on the other hand, are a result of the circumstances under which the writing occurs. These attitudes can range from a general affect (liking or disliking writing) or an apprehension resulting from a perceived lack of mechanical skill and competence. It could also be from a personal dislike for criticism or evaluation, a blank page paralysis or a preference for task avoidance. Each would result in a writing apprehension, but the solution for each would be dramatically different.

The third test used in this study was a 22-question test to determine whether students, based on their own perceived writing habits, were blockers or nonblockers when they tried to compose (Rose, 1980). The questions for this test were drawn from comments made by students participating in studies to determine which types of students block when

they write (Rose, 1980) (see Table 1). Blockers were identified by answering in the affirmative to such statements as "A good essay always grabs a reader's attention immediately." Nonblockers were considered to be those that answered in the affirmative to statements as "Grammar and punctuation are not as important as the subject."

### Materials and Methods

Data collected for this study came from 216 students participating in a writing course at the University of Florida's College of Agriculture. The students were tested in-class on separate occasions using the Kiersey-Bates personality index (Kiersey & Bates, 1978) and the Blocker/Nonblocker test. In addition, 38 students from another writing course were given the

Kiersey-Bates test and the MCWAM writing anxiety test (Riffe & Stack, 1988) to determine if there was a relationship between personality type and the degree of apprehension.

### Results

Results showed that 54 percent of the students were extroverted, 33 percent were introverted and 11 percent tested as x-factor, meaning their scores were evenly divided. Student tests also showed that 60 percent were sensing and 35 percent were intuitive. The test showed that students were 74 percent judging and 22 percent were perceptual. Because the originators of the Kiersey-Bates test described J-Types as people who just dive into their work, we predicted that a majority of J-Types would be non-blockers and a major-

**Table 1: True or False BLOCKER/NONBLOCKER TEST**

B*	A good essay always grabs a reader's attention immediately.
NB*	When I am stuck, I just start writing. I'll write what I can.
B	If sentences aren't grammatically correct they aren't useful.
NB	I can use as many thesis ideas in my lead paragraph as I want.
B	I would rather be late than produce something that isn't the way I want it.
NB	Rules like "write only what you know about" just aren't true.
B	Every essay should have three or four main points.
NB	If a writing rule conflicts with the subject matter, I rethink the subject matter.
B	I don't start writing until my outline covers every point.
NB	If my original idea won't work, then I need to proceed differently.
B	Complex outlines result in precise writing.
NB	Get it down, then throw it away later if you want.
B	When I write, I use ideas, images and irony to provide insight.
NB	The ending is more important than the beginning.
B	Planning and strategies are important to produce something worth my effort.
NB	Grammar and punctuation are not as important as the subject matter.
B	Each writing situation is a problem that needs a blueprint for success.
NB	I edit after I'm done.
B	I won't go on until that first paragraph is down.
NB	An outline is a general guide not a map.
B	When I write I follow the rules for writing fairly closely.
NB	When I write I have no problem composing.

\*Delete for testing

ity of P-types would test as blockers. This was not the case. Sixty percent of the J-types were blockers, compared to 43% for the P-types. However, when the students were segregated to account for sensing (S-type) versus the intuitive (N-type), the roles were reversed. As a result, 55% of SJ-types were blockers as opposed to 66% of the NP- types.

Results from the MCWAM test indicated that while this instrument can be useful for locating specific students with anxiety problems, it provided no additional insight when analyzed in conjunction with the results of either the personality test or the Blocker-Nonblocker test. For the purposes of this study, the results from the MCWAM were divided into three categories: (1) General Affect (the writer's feelings or attitudes towards writing); (2) Blank Page Paralysis; and (3) Mechanical Skill or Competence (the writer's attitudes about these traits in their own writing). Results showed no significant differences between means of introverts or extroverts with regard to their attitudes toward the act of writing or their perception of their own mechanical skills (*t*-test, .05). There was, however, a significant shift with regards to their responses to questions designed to measure blank page paralysis. In this study, extroverts were significantly more likely to agree that they have a hard time choosing words or beginning the writing process. These differences, however, occur in extroverted individuals who were designated as 'Blockers' by the 22-question Blocker-Nonblocker test. The differences between means for the other groups were insignificant.

### Conclusions

Tests designed to determine the motivations or inhibitions of students can be very useful to professors or

instructors of writing. For example, students who are introverted and whose greatest writing problem is their innate dislike for communicating with others (33 percent in this study) can be identified with the Kiersey-Bates test and given assignments specifically designed to be non-threatening or humorous. Numerous past studies have found that the use of cartoons and humor in textbooks or teaching programs has significant positive effects on student attitudes about learning and comprehension (Nehiley, 1992, 1982). Since writing is in part a learned skill, assignments designed to appear less intimidating would be most successful with introverted students.

In addition, students with a low general affect or self-concept as writers can be identified using the MCWAM and given assignments that emphasize the positive nature of writing by having them analyze successful past papers and improve them. Results from this study found that over half of the students were blockers or individuals with a dislike for writing that was not writing-skill or competency-based. These students would benefit most from assignments specifically designed to offset self-doubts and strengthen their individual self-concept.

Other blockers are individuals who suffer apprehension because they know that, after it is completed, their writing will be evaluated by someone who will make assumptions about the writer. They dread writing because they fear they will create a negative impression because their writing lacks eloquence. These students could be identified with the MCWAM and given assignments that analyze the style and structure of other students writing so that they could not only learn about the writing process, but also see the benefits of

Impersonal critiquing. Individuals who are apprehensive about being evaluated by others might also benefit from using such post-writing evaluative word-processing programs as Rightwriter™ or Grammatik IV™\*. All writer's stop and start trying to decide if they've used a wrong word or misspelled a correct one. Simply knowing that their writing will be evaluated objectively by a machine might make them less intimidated and free them up to write more fluently. In addition, knowing that they can use a computer's word-processing features like spellcheck and the thesaurus to find and replace errors might encourage them to write more creatively.

Students who are J-types (74 percent in this study) are individuals who short-circuit the planning process because they decide things too quickly. These individuals can benefit most from pre-writing assignments that emphasize mind mapping, idea trees, bubble outlines, computerized outlining, or schematic flow chart approaches that compensate for their unwillingness to brainstorm or analyze. Students who are identified as P-types (43 percent), or individuals who have trouble beginning the writing process, could be given assignments that emphasize an overview approach based on either the listing of facts (for sensing types [60 percent overall in this study]) or the identification of contingencies or alternatives (for intuitives [35 percent]).

By using the Kiersey-Bates test in conjunction with the MCWAM test, a professor or instructor could differentiate among the types of affective writing problems facing the stu-

dent and then develop a series of writing experiences specifically designed to facilitate writing by attempting to offset affective factors in the student as they tackle the writing process. Students could then be given different writing assignments to help them learn a writing style that would be less frustrating. Future research should determine which preferences or predispositions associated with these personality types have the greatest impact on students attitudes toward and feelings about writing and composing.

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\* Based on Sarasota, Florida and San Francisco, California discussions with students who participated in these studies, the personality types sensing-intuitive and judging-perceiving would probably be better indicators of attitudes toward writing.